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Contact: Doc or Patricia Spitzer
spitzeranch@mindspring.com or
(864)972-9140 or (864)710-0257

Critical Thinking For Beef Cattle Production Systems - Part 1

The beef industry of today is obviously complicated and the beef industry of the future promises to be no easier. In fact, the effort it takes to maintain profitability for cow/calf producers will continue to escalate and **by far the vast majority will be mental effort rather than physical effort.** Forty years ago a prominent rancher with a 1500+ cow ranch that took three generations to build stated, "There is no poor planning that hard work cannot overcome". Now he is bankrupt, has lost the ranch and lives (if you can call it that) pretty well penniless in a Medicaid retirement home. The cattleman (cattlemoan) of the future with excellent thinking skills and problem solving abilities will be the one to be economically viable and maintain profitability.

Today we live in the age of dramatic increases in "knowledge" generated through research and scientific investigation. Is all of that knowledge useful? Is all of that knowledge applicable to the problems on your beef operation? Does all of that knowledge equate to increased profitability for you? *For example, first-calf-two-year-old beef cows have shorter gestation periods than do mature cows - it's about two days.* That's knowledge that has been reported in literally hundreds of research publications to be relatively certain it is fact. But it fails the test for the previous questions asked. In other words the knowledge may be an interesting fact, but it does you little or no good to increase profitability for your cow herd. Certainly that knowledge should make you prepared for heifers to calve a few days earlier than mature cows, but that's the extent of its value.

The exponential growth of knowledge and scientific reporting has created the absolute

necessity for critical thinking skills. Beef producers of the twenty-first century must determine the relevance of that knowledge, the applicability of that knowledge and be capable of solving problems with a high likelihood of success while maintaining profitability. Knowledge alone will be inadequate in solving problems and simply recalling facts will not lead to satisfactory solutions. There has to be a higher level and that's where critical thinking skills enter the picture.

What is critical thinking? Dr. Ken Odde, Head of the Department of Animal Science and Industry, Kansas State University says, "Critical thinking is engaging in reflective skepticism". Critical thinking involves not only the ability to call up knowledge (facts) but the ability to evaluate that knowledge analytically and objectively. It also demands the individual to evaluate one's own thought processes and beliefs as a skeptic. Why? Because we humans have a huge flaw in that we always believe that we know more than we actually know and have capabilities in excess of what is reality. Most all of us studied Sir Francis Bacon in beginning science classes in high school. He was fond of stating that an obstacle to solving problems was, "Man prefers to believe what he prefers to be true". *There are numerous examples: A survey of one million high school seniors found that 70% truly believed they were above average in leadership ability and only 2% thought they were below average. A survey of college professors found that 94% thought they were better at their jobs than the average of the other professors they worked beside.* Experience and common sense surely tell us neither of these can possibly be factual.

Does that then make critical thinking negativism? Not at all. Instead the best at critical thinking always maintain a positive attitude. They constantly evaluate their own ideas, information they read or hear and the valid opinions of others they depend upon to be "sounding boards". That skepticism is cultivated by constant internal debate and discussions with others one respects for the knowledge and experience they bring to the discussion.

Perhaps a good way to summarize critical thinking is a quote from Dr. J. E. McPeck in *Critical Thinking and Education* when he defines critical thinking ability as “the skill to engage in an activity with reflective skepticism”. He further states that “critical thinking requires the judicious use of skepticism, tempered by experience, such that it is productive of a more satisfactory solution or insight into, the problem at hand”. In other words, how do I take what I know and what I can learn from others coupled with my experiences and theirs; add to that the realities of the situation and come up with a profitable solution to the complexities of making a profit with a cow herd? And can I be reflectively skeptical enough to know when the facts are the correct ones to solve the problem or even if I am asking the right questions? None of that is easy. Over the next several months we will continue the critical thinking discussion onwards to problem solving and situational critical thinking with real beef production examples.

The Spitzer family invites you to their twenty third annual **BULL SALE** scheduled for **Saturday, February 27, 2016**. Their **Summer Newsletter** should be in the mail by August 1, 2015. If you wish your name added to their mailing list call 864/972-9140, send an email note to spitzeranch@mindspring.com or write SPITZER RANCH, 1511 HWY 59, Fair Play, SC, 29643. In the summer newsletter will be a Bull Test Performance Report to date for those bulls being developed for the 2016 bull sale. Additionally they always include educational tips, inspiration and insights into a variety of timely topics of interest to those cattlemen whose goal is increased profitability. Also be sure to visit their WEB SITE at www.srbulls.com and you might join over 1750 other ranchers who follow their posts and QUOTE OF THE WEEK on Facebook.

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